

## **Social geography III: committing to social justice**

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### **Abstract**

Social justice is regarded as a key underpinning principle of social geography. This review focuses on social justice in social geography and related issues of inequality, discrimination and intolerance. I appraise debates about social justice in social geography and then pay specific attention to issues of poverty and welfare, gender and sexuality, and race and ethnicity. I argue for social geography to be committed to social justice and conclude by calling for action to commit to promoting social justice in our teaching, research, in our professional practices and in how we challenge our universities to operate.

Keywords: Inequality; discrimination; poverty; gender; sexuality; race

### **Introduction**

In this final report about contemporary social geography, I turn to the topic of social justice, a key underpinning principle for much work in the sub-discipline. Social justice is about addressing the unfair outcomes that result from both social processes and institutional decision-making. It is not just about individual fairness but also about the distribution of society's benefits and burdens (Smith, 2000a, b); it is socio-political (Thompson, 2016, Olson, 2018) and raises wider moral questions. Social justice intersects and overlaps with debates and issues relating to equality and diversity and so is a key dimension of anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 2016); as Smith (2000a) noted, a just society is always underpinned by equality. Seeking spatial justice is as Soja (2010: 2) put it, 'a struggle over geography'.

Social geographers have particular strengths in exploring lived experiences of those suffering due to social inequalities, including offering critiques of problematic government policies or welfare regimes; moreover, social geographers are skilled at doing this work in a whole host of engaging, creative and activist ways. However, a lot less attention is paid in social geography to what social justice looks like and feels like, and what policies might be put in place to make social justice a reality. Oswin (2018: 614) notes that 'these are frustrating and downright frightening times and we simply must think deeply about the ways in which multiple forms of domination work in concert to maintain and intensify an inequitable and violent status quo'. One of the main arguments in this review is that there is a tendency to sidestep social justice in social geography rather than engaging with it directly. Yet, Oswin (2018) urges that we should keep telling it like it is and in concert with this call, I argue that social geography is committed to social justice and so should be explicitly political in advocating for it.

I appraise debates about social justice before moving on to review recent work that engages directly with social justice or with debates about exclusion, marginalisation and inequality. I pay specific attention to three areas including poverty and welfare, gender and sexuality, and race and ethnicity. I conclude by reflecting on the myriad of ways in which social geographers study, explore and expose social injustices through their research practices. Here, I argue that we urgently need to challenge social injustices through our research, our teaching practices and more broadly within the discipline of geography and within the institutions in which we work.

## **Approaching social justice**

Smith (2000b) pointed out that geographical interest in social justice grew from the early 1970s. Harvey (1973: 101) emphasised the importance of 'distributive territorial justice' with a focus on 'need, contribution to common good, and merit'. This approach to social justice focuses on the redistribution of wealth and so tends to be about socio-economic and class-based inequalities. Part of the focus here tends to be on poverty and the need to eradicate it. Young (1990) was critical of the distributive model, one criticism being that it limited discussion to material goods, income, wealth and jobs and so restricted questions about broader social structures and diverse forms of inequality. She proposed a structural model that encompassed a wider range of social inequalities such as those relating to gender, 'race', disability and sexuality (see also Waterstone, 2010; Young, 2008). As Smith (2000b: 1151) observed, 'the focus on difference has ... broadened the scope of social justice, and drawn attention to the disadvantage of specific groups'.

Partly due to differing approaches to, and understandings of, social justice over time, there is a distinct lack of intellectual and political consensus about the concept of social justice (Heynen et al, 2018). There is also a diverse range of tactics, approaches and practices that have been developed to expose and challenge diverse forms of social injustice. This lack of consensus and diversity of perspectives is itself a strength of social justice work in social geography. Heynen et al (2018: 301) observes that 'geographers maintain fidelity to the idea that the discipline should keep working to understand unjust processes within urban life and simultaneously seek solutions to make cities more just' (Heynen, 2018: 301). Despite this, Barnett (2016: 112) notes that 'Geography is a resolutely moralist discipline, and yet geographers remain rather averse to spending much time on normative questions about whether and how and why observable patterns of inequity, discrimination, or unevenness are actually unjust.' So, attention tends to be on specific inequalities (Barnett, 2016) without much being said about what it is that makes these unjust; relatively little is also said about specific forms of social *justice* might look like and feel like in and of itself (Barnett, 2018).

A whole host of issues and concerns could be drawn attention to in a report about social justice in social geography; some of these are explored in my previous reports about intersectionality and about Islamophobia, transphobia and sizism (Hopkins, 2019a and b). Other examples of important work that draws attention to social injustices include issues relating to disability hate crime in the UK (Hall, 2019), the growing number of forced disappeared students in Mexico (Wright, 2018), housing activists struggles for social justice in South Korea (Shin, 2018) and the displacements of young Ecuadorians due to zero tolerance policing (Swanson, 2018). Moreover, there is also important work about energy justice (Waitt and Harada, 2019), food justice (Agyeman and McEntee, 2014; Blake, 2017) and mobility justice (Lubitow et al, 2020), to name only a few. These are just some important recent examples. In the rest of this report, I focus on three pressing concerns that I argue require ongoing attention from social geographers working for social justice: poverty and welfare, gender and sexuality, and race and ethnicity.

## **Poverty, welfare and social justice**

Ten years ago, Milbourne (2010) reviewed research about the geographies of poverty and welfare. He observed that there were significant gaps in the literature even although there has been a growth in geographical scholarship in this field. Powell et al (2001) differentiate between people poverty and place poverty point out that there is more about

the former compared to the latter. Research about poverty and welfare – including issues such as austerity and social class – remain somewhat marginalised in the discipline despite being matters that require urgent social action. A social geography that is for social justice is a social geography that campaigns against income inequality, challenges unjust welfare allocations and resists political decisions that maintain the existence of poverty.

Relational poverty studies provides a significant focus for work in this area (e.g. Crane et al, 2020; Elwood et al, 2016, McCann et al, 2019). It challenges the individualisation of poverty by exploring how:

‘...poverty is produced in the inseparable interplay of institutional rules and practices; processes of meaning-making (for example, by middle classes and elites, policy-makers and politicians); class/race subjectivities and identities; economic restructuring and postcolonial governance’ (Elwood *et al*, 2017: 746).

Such as an approach also looks relationally across different contexts rather than focusing narrowly on specific territories or contexts. For example, Lawson and Elwood (2014) explored how middle class actors through different moments and processes trouble dominant understandings of poverty.

Issues of representation, stigma and place often come into play in work about poverty, welfare and social justice. Nayak (2019) provides an important corrective to debates about ‘urban territorial stigmatisation’ by focusing on the marginalised post-industrial location of Teesside in North East England rather than the ‘spectacular’ urban sites often found in the literature. Moreover, he demonstrates how local people challenge and resist the stigmatisation of their local areas. Moreover, Baldwin and Crane (2020) call for greater sensitivity to the place of urban university buildings and campuses, and racialized bodies and politics in poverty scholarship.

Social geographers are often very skilled at exploring the lived experiences of those at the sharp end of social injustices; this is especially the case with work about homelessness. For example, Klodawsky (2009) argues for a gendered and race-sensitive analysis of the experiences of homeless women in Toronto, and Kennelly (2020) draws attention to the lived experiences of young homeless men in downtown Ottawa. Drawing upon debates about performativity and embodiment, Jolley (2020) challenges the complex relational engagements of homeless people demonstrating how they become someone more than homeless.

An important area of work has developed in recent years that charts the exclusionary and unjust outcomes of austerity policies. Strong (2018) discusses the ways in which welfare reforms and the withdrawal of state of support results in people not being able to meet their basic dietary needs. Through exploring ‘actually existing austerity and the localisation of responsibility’ in the UK, he argues for more work about how austerity is experienced and lived out. Hall (2018: 783) provides an important insight by ‘unpacking everyday austerity, as it is lived, felt and experienced’ in the UK through family, friends and intimate relations, and Jupp et al (2019) draw attention to housing, gender and care in this context. Related work has focused on the rise in the number of food banks due to welfare cuts. Cloke et al (2016: 719) observe that ‘Food banks have fast become an iconic signification of social injustice and welfare failure’ yet can provide important spaces of care and encounter.

### **Gender, sexuality and social justice**

In summing up the diverse focus of their book about *Feminist Spaces*, Mollett et al (2018: 190), noted that the issues explored ‘underscore our commitment to social justice and

solidarity among not just women, but all feminists, regardless of gender, working for progressive and just change around the globe'. Related to this, Hancock (2011: 1) observes that 'gender inequalities and discriminations on the basis of sexual preference are two obvious aspects of injustice' with the burden often falling on women, and non-heterosexuals being frequently marginalised, regularly excluded and often stigmatised. I draw attention to three foci of crucial work about gender, sexuality and social justice: diverse forms of violence; injustices towards trans people; and the unjust geographies of queer spaces.

Diverse forms of violence – and the contested spaces, times and politics involved – provide a key focus for feminist social geographers interested in advancing social justice in relation to gender and sexuality. This is about how violence is experienced but also how fears associated with violence and the trauma that circulates all of this create, reinforce and sustain social injustices (Pain et al, 2020, Tamas, 2014). As Pain (2014: 532) observes, violence framed as global or domestic are 'intimate and structural, global and everyday, at once'. Datta (2016) has conducted significant work about sexual violence against women in India (see also Sen et al, 2020) observing that such incidents are the product of deeply ingrained sexism against women that extends across their life-courses. Cultures of violence are also found on our university campuses 'as sites of relational violence of gendered bodies' (Bartos, 2018: 4) with attention being drawn to the role of university leaders in this (Dowler et al, 2014). With respect to domestic violence, Bowstead (2019) observes that a common social and state response to a 'diverse range of abuses, injustices and exclusion' is to provide some form of shelter away from the damage being inflicted, and Cuomo (2019) critically considers the fears of staff working an exchange and visitation center in Pennsylvania in their interactions with domestic abusers.

The ongoing injustices enacted upon those who do not conform to traditional understandings of the gender binary continue to provide an important focus for socially just social geographies of gender and sexuality (Abelson, 2019, Hopkins, 2019b, Johnston, 2019). Rosenberg and Oswin (2015) have drawn attention to the regularly hypermasculine and frequently heteronormative context of US prisons that are negotiated by transgender prisoners. Drawing upon research in Oregon, Lubitow et al (2020) focus upon the issue of mobility justice demonstrating the significant challenges that gender minorities experience in negotiating routine mobility practices. In Australia and New Zealand, Gorman-Murray et al (2018) have focused upon the vulnerabilities – including in relation to different public, private and social spaces - experienced by trans people in the context of disasters. Notable amongst this growing area of scholarship is Ableson's (2019) critical study of the lives of sixty-six trans men in the US where significant issues of inequality, masculinities, violence, heterosexism and cissexism are explored in detail.

In relation to queer spaces, Goh (2018) discusses the unjust geographies at the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality through the work of queer activist organisations in New York City. Through working closely with two organisations, Goh (2018) emphasises that claims on spaces in the city matter as the creation of queer spaces is not only about 'an appeal to queer identity' (p. 474). Furthermore, the ongoing struggles of these queer activist organisations highlight the continuing injustices in the city and offer new ways forward to the creation of more just spaces. Related to such struggles Nash et al (2019) explore how discourses about freedom of speech in relation to sexual and gender politics are contested in different places and the importance of university campuses in relation to this.

## **Race, ethnicity and social justice**

Although issues of race were marginal at best and silent at worst in earlier debates about social justice (Hamilton and Foote, 2018), research about social geographies of race and racism has emerged over the last few decades that more clearly foregrounds issues of social justice (e.g. Bonds, 2018, Ehrkamp, 2019, Shabazz, 2015, Smith, 1989). An interest in, and concern about, social injustices underpin much work on race in social geography especially with respect to critiquing social and institutional processes of racialisation, in exposing the damaging effects of racism and in highlighting the unjust, unequal and discriminatory intersections of race and ethnicity with other markers of social difference. However, the focus on social justice tends to be implicit here; I contend that it would be useful to be more explicit about the socially unjust nature of racism and racial inequalities in order to give our scholarship more political clout, relevance and contemporary currency (Hopkins, 2011). I comment briefly on three areas that provide fruitful grounds for advancing socially just social geographies in this domain: Black geographies; indigeneity; and critical whiteness studies.

The first area that is crucial here is the focus on Black Geographies (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Noxolo, 2020). Hawthorne (2019: 2) clearly justifies the focus upon this given: 'the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Black communities; the surveillance and policing of Black neighborhoods; and the new configurations of anti Black racism, nationalism and xenophobia represented by the global resurgence of the far-right.'

Allen et al (2018: 1003) note that 'black geographies are seen as a political, social justice project within the academy and society' and point to the ways in which landscapes and place can both limit people's ability to work towards social justice whilst also offering potential sites for social justice activism. Some of the earliest work in this field (e.g. McKittrick and Woods, 2007, McKittrick, 2011) has facilitated the growth of the sub-field of Black Geographies including the development of an American Association of Geographers Speciality Group. Hamilton and Foote (2018) observe that at the same time as Harvey published *Social Justice and the City*, police officers on Chicago's South Side were torturing confessions from around 200 black men. Here, space was an important factor in enabling police officers to escape any repercussions for their unjust actions, one such strategy being the categorisation of specific neighbourhoods as 'crime-ridden and lawless' (p. 405). Other important research includes work about gendered and queer geographies of blackness (Bailey and Shabazz, 2014, Eaves, 2017), Black Muslim women's clothing practices (Johnson, 2017) and family narratives and intergenerational relations amongst black communities in North Carolina (Scott, 2017).

With reference to my second point, Radcliffe (2017: 226) concluded her first progress report about geography and indigeneity noting that 'a conversation with critical race theory might unpack some of the ways in which racialized exclusions and epistemic violence are perpetuated beyond and within the discipline'. This signals the importance of considering issues of social injustices in social geography research about indigeneity. Bawaka Country (2019a, 2019b, 2020) is leading innovative and cutting-edge work through deeply participatory scholarship in Yolŋu Northeast Arnhem Land, Australia about the importance and role of songspirals in understanding indigenous understandings of climate and time, and in re-thinking responsibility in relation to colonising processes. Other notable example of work addressing issues of indigeneity and social justice include Barraclough's (2018) exploration of indigenous and Mexican American struggles for social justice in the urban US West through seeking to 'transform white settler myths of the cowboy, rodeo, and the frontier' (p. 521). Also, Simpson and Bagelman's (2018: 566) focus on the violences and

injustices inflicted upon the Lekwungen food system as a result of settler colonial processes of 'dispossession, urbanization and cultural genocide' (Simpson and Bagelman, 2018: 566) in Victoria British Columbia, Daigle (2019) provides a critical insight into the spectacle of reconciliation in Canada, and Sullivan (2020) explores the construction and contestation of indigenous Australian sexualities.

Social geographers that are attentive to issues of social injustice tend to focus on those who are socially and spatially marginalised and excluded by unjust processes and outcomes, and there are good reasons for this. However, my third point is that we need to (continue to) be reflexive and critical about those who hold power and control, and those who occupy the centre ground. This requires that critical attention be paid to whiteness (e.g. Faria and Mollett, 2016; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000) and white supremacy (Bonds and Inwood, 2016) including how this operates in concert with other forms of inequality such as sexism (Bonds, 2019). An example of important research here includes Mott's (2019) recent work about white social justice activists in Tucson, Arizona explores how they negotiate their white privilege within activist networks and the significance of anti-racism in movements seeking social justice. Faria and Mollett (2020: 5) note 'confronting critical geography's whiteness is both intellectually honest and imperative ... it helps us understand the complexities and contradictions of power in the collective pursuit of solidarity among critical geographers'.

### **Doing social justice**

In closing my third and final progress report, I draw attention to the diverse ways in which social geographers seek to address social injustices. This is a contested issue as scholars bring different approaches and diverse collaborations with them in their attempts to expose social injustices. Part of the contestation here is about the tactics used to seek or achieve social justice and this raises questions about how we conceive of power, how we understand resistance and challenge, and what we as our role as academics (Pain, Kesby and Askins, 2012). For example, Cahill et al (2019) have used participatory action research to explore how young people of color understand and challenge the methods whereby broken windows policing works to criminalize and dehumanise them in New York. Darby and Chatterton (2019) worked towards transformative social change through taking part in civil society groups in Leeds, UK, whilst Pain et al (2019) used the political potential of song as a strategy of resistance against social housing demolition in the UK. Others have been doing research as volunteer practitioners in community groups in the UK (Blazek and Askins, 2019) whilst Olson (2019) has been raising awareness about youth caregivers (young carers) through research and advocacy in the USA. These diverse strategies and approaches are a key strength of social geographies. Perhaps the challenge now is to assess what tactics work best in different places and times as this will be important in seeking to achieve social justice?

Critical attention to our research approaches and strategies should also sit alongside transformations in terms of how we challenge and dismantle the inequalities and injustices within our everyday professional practices, including in our research, our teaching and our relationships with the discipline of geography and the institutions in which we work. Consider the questions raised by Heynen et al (2018: 302):

'... why is it that the practice of doing that scholarship, is still fraught and more difficult for many women-identified, non-white, LGBTQ, and gender-nonconforming people who continue to endure unequal workplace conditions? How is it that our collective record of sustained attention to socially unjust geographies can continue to be accompanied by such deep betrayals of justice in our professional and personal

relations? Of course, part of the answer to this is that those geographies of injustice we examine also exist within the patriarchal conditions of our intimate social worlds'. There are much work to do when it comes to promoting social justice within academia generally and especially within the discipline of geography. Social geography has a key role to play here. There are many ways that social geographers are challenging the social injustices found within institutions and within institutional practices. Hawthorne and Heitz (2018: 148) see 'the academy as a site for the reproduction of epistemic violence against women and people of color', Johnson (2019) refers to the 'white background of academia', and Bhakta (2019) urges attention be given to the troubling intersections of race and disability.

For some, social justice can be promoted through teaching and classroom interactions. For example, Evans (2019) critically explores the challenges involved in teaching about female genital mutilation/cutting in Africa, and Esson (2018) recommends resisting the whiteness of the geography curriculum by integrating critical race theory, social justice and debates about decolonisation into teaching. Related, Alderman et al (2019) argue that anti-racist pedagogies should be employed more often in the discipline. This, they argue is not only about teaching such issues in the classroom but is also about how we 'recognize the role of educational institutions, practices, and practitioners in producing and reproducing racism' (p.2). In doing so, they employ 'regional storytelling' as a mechanism for reflecting upon the regional, racial and ethnic positions of teachers and students and how this shapes anti-racist pedagogy.

Social justice can be enacted through how we perform our research, how we write and who we work with. Mountz et al (2015) seek to re-make the university through enacting a feminist ethic of care that challenges the neoliberalism of the academy through slow scholarship. Mott and Cockayne (2017: 954) seek to challenge the white heteromascularity of geographical thought and praxis through a politics of 'conscientious engagement' in citation practices. The importance of working relationships with students, graduate students and colleagues based around care and mentoring (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston, 2019) can play a role in enabling people to navigate the social injustices found within the academy, such as those working towards racial justice (Faria et al, 2019). Much of this is about challenging the institutions in which we work to be more socially just. Engaging with critical university studies (e.g. The Analogue University, 2019) could be one mechanism amongst many for opening up additional space for developing social geographies that are committed to social justice. Dowler et al (2014) expose institutional violence within higher education and Stein (2018) points to the failures of university leaders in the US to address racism and commit to institutional change in the context of Trump's travel ban in 2017. Bringing together these diverse tactics of challenging social injustice – in our research, our teaching and our professional practices – will continue to enable us to challenge social injustices and inequalities making it clear that social geographers are committed to social justice.

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